

IMPROVING DEMOCRACY BY TAKING UP CIVIC QUESTIONS AND HOPING TOGETHER

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We find ourselves facing a series of challenging situations today, leading us into what Dewey might call, “indeterminate situations.” Within those, we struggle to figure how to move forward and we are pushed to take up new inquiries and new actions. Let’s learn from our past and the many challenges we face today as we explore not only the fundamental civic question “what should we do?” in the present, but also the educational question “what do we want to become?” in the future (Levine, 2016; Dishon & Ben-Porath, 2018; UNESCO, 2020). Answering these questions requires imagining how we can be different and better, more just, more inclusive. But imagining is not a job best done alone; rather, we should work with others in small publics to articulate possibilities together and to try them out. As those who generate ideas and inquiry into them with others, this work can be facilitated by scholars, teachers, poets, activists, and more.

Part of doing and sustaining democracy requires taking up these civic questions as we engage in hoping with others. Doing the hard work of democracy is related to Dewey’s account of meliorism: “the idea that at least there is a sufficient basis of goodness in life and its conditions so that by thought and earnest effort we may constantly make things better” (MW 9:294). Deweyan meliorism holds out for better things ahead, but that future rests squarely on our shoulders and it is our responsibility to take up the charge.

Experiments in Democracy

One way to revive democracy is to lead or participate in these inquiries and experiments. Now is not the time to take to the sidelines. It requires active participation in civil society, in politics, in education. It requires forming and growing small publics around areas of key concern, such as police brutality and racial inequities in the impact of

COVID-19. Within those publics, we must identify and define those problems—to name and frame them in ways that increase understandings, build movements, and shift perspectives of others (Knight Abowitz and Stitzlein, 2020). Supporting and nurturing the fledgling publics we've witnessed taking shape in recent months requires deep and ongoing collaboration and communication that works to determine, solve, and implement solutions to problems (Dewey, 1927). Ongoing deliberation and action in our schools and scholarly circles, then, can sustain maturing publics by providing new language and ideas to label shared experiences and bridge across differences, and by adapting to meet and address new problems.

Democratic Hope

America has long been a country that has seen itself as a beacon of hope, but too many Americans right now are struggling to hope; they are exhausted, ill, frightened, angry, and worn down. Hope is a set of democratic habits that disposes citizens toward imagination and possibility, motivating them to act to improve their lives or those of others (Stitzlein, 2020). As habits, hope is something that we can work to cultivate and sustain, even in the midst of current struggles. This can be done in our schools and in our civil society, thereby providing a source and a sustenance for budding and weary citizens. In those locations, we can build citizen agency, learn how to more effectively engage in political dissent against present problems, and craft new stories about more desirable futures. Habits of hope can be reemployed well into the future, enabling us to reestablish democracy anew as we encounter new struggles down the road. Hoping can move us out of indeterminate situations. Hoping also shapes how democracy is understood, whether it is valued, and what many of its principles and aims are. Teaching habits of hope and hoping together can help us revive democracy in the months and years ahead.

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